

African private higher education: Contradictions and challenges

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It would be misleading to suggest that all quality challenges reside in the private higher education sector in Sub-Saharan Africa. Unfunded expansion and overall lack of human and material resources are enemies of quality and standards throughout the public sector as well. However, it is pertinent to focus on the rapidly expanding private sector as now, worldwide, more than one in three university-level students are studying in a private institution, and there are approximately twice as many private universities in Sub-Saharan Africa as public ones. The rising social hunger for higher education, fiscal constraints and specific religious needs of certain social groups have meant that the state, in many national locations, can no longer meet demand, and the private sector is seen as a response to capacity challenges in both developed and developing countries.

The market ideology of the private sector is often perceived as a contradiction to the core values of education for all, and critics fear that it will contribute to elite formation and social exclusion (Morley, 2014). Fears have tended to focus on the commodification of knowledge, the changing ethos, curriculum and values of higher education, a possible abdication of state responsibility, and the belief that new providers are compromising quality and standards by producing poorly regulated 'diploma mills'. The private sector is also conceptualised as a threat to social diversity and equality of opportunity, with the potential to exclude students from low socio-economic backgrounds. There are questions about whether expansion means democratisation (Morley et al, 2008). Market opponents fear increasing social and institutional stratification and elite formation (Ball, 2007; Brown, 2011). Market proponents position private higher education as a contradiction to the planned scarcity of higher educational opportunities that has traditionally contributed to the formation of a global elite (World Bank, 2009).

Widening participation in Ghana and Tanzania

In a recent empirical study, *Widening Participation in Higher Education in Ghana and Tanzania* (Morley, 2012), it was found that private higher education played a contradictory role in widening access and opportunities – especially for women, mature students and those from low socio-economic backgrounds. The project was a mixed-methods study of two public and two not-for-profit private universities. It used 200 life history interviews with students that explored their experiences of primary, secondary and higher education, and their future plans and aspirations. The same number of university staff and policy makers were interviewed about barriers and enablers for non-traditional students. The project produced statistical data on participation, completion and achievement patterns presented on Equity Scorecards, and collected evidence to build a theory about socio-cultural aspects of

higher education in Ghana and Tanzania. The three main structures of inequality included on the Equity Scorecards were gender, socio-economic status and age. The gathering of qualitative accounts and statistical data allowed for triangulation between what people said and the quantitative facts. So, while many staff applauded the successes of widening participation policies in shifting the student demographic, many of the Equity Scorecards demonstrated a woeful lack of participation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

There were numerous student complaints in both countries in the study about quality and standards at the two private universities in the case study – particularly in relation to lecturers, lack of facilities, support, accommodation and services. There was little sense of student entitlement to quality in pedagogical and academic practices. There was scant discussion by staff in either country of the student experience or student voice as an evaluation mechanism. Accountability was mainly conceptualised in relation to the validating state, rather than to consumer groups.

Quality and standards were contradictorily represented in staff and student narratives. Staff frequently stressed quality and expansive facilities and resources, whereas many students reported lack and deficit – especially in relation to ICT and library facilities. A male staff member in the Ghanaian private university suggested that private universities were superior to public ones because of their investment in infrastructure: 'Well the key thing is more quality; it's the quality and facilities. Quality, comfort and facilities.'

However, a male student in the same university said: 'The performance is very, very bad. Because we lack resources.' A female student in the Tanzanian private university also said: 'First of all we have very small library. We have very small computer rooms, we have very few computers.' The spatial limitations were often contrasted with the expanding student numbers.

Massification was widely discussed by students, with reports of between 800 and 1,000 students in some classes. A male student in the Ghanaian private university suggested that a major problem was 'numbers. For example, last year, one lecturer was taking about 1,000 student people for all their subjects'. Spatial injustices led to cognitive injustices, according to the students, who argued that these lecturer–student ratios unequalled their opportunities to learn and participate in any meaningful manner in the classroom.

Whereas staff discussed how the smallness of private universities enabled positive and friendly learning environments, students often reported how relationships between students and lecturers were difficult, tense, authoritarian and hierarchical. A female student in the Ghanaian private university relayed how the lecturers 'frightened' the students and sent them out of class 'if we are talking or we are not sitting properly or we are not dressed



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Students at private universities reported poor ICT and library facilities

properly'. A male student in the Ghanaian private university commented on the lack of accessibility of academic staff to students: 'You need lecturers so much and you can't find them.'

Another male Ghanaian student suggested that the tutors were recruited for their professional knowledge as accountants or lawyers and lacked pedagogical knowledge. He recalled how: 'One time I went see a lecturer complaining about the way he was teaching in the sense that I wasn't really getting it because I didn't have the foundation ... He just laughed over it saying I will get it I should just try and study.' Throughout the study, there was little evidence of students being treated as valued and valuable customers. The students themselves, rather than academic processes, were seen to be in need of regulation.

Lack of redress

The area that appeared to attract the most quality concern was assessment. This was frequently reported by students in the vocabulary of instability and unfairness. In spite of paying private sector fees, students tended to lack basic consumer rights including the existence of grade criteria, service-level agreements and the right to appeal. Students complained that they never knew why they received particular grades, and when they sought explanations for unpredicted low grades, they were told to make a formal complaint. However, when they tried to complain, there were no procedures, or even forms to complete. A male student in the Ghanaian private university reported that 'a lot of us, you

know, were really aggrieved but the channels for redress were really few'.

There were tales of chaotic timetabling of examinations, with some students scheduled to write two examinations at the same time. A male student in the Ghanaian private university reported his powerlessness in the face of scheduling errors: 'I consulted the students' service and exams unit but there was nothing they could do so I ended up failing one of the papers because I couldn't be at two venues at the same time.' Assessment exemplified some of the tensions, when educational matters collide with financial considerations, with several students reporting how they were evicted from exams, or refused access to their examination results for non- or late payment of fees.

Assessment was conceptualised by students as a major relay of power, with the potential for corruption, exploitation and sexual harassment. For example, the lack of quality assessment procedures, including double-marking, meant that some unscrupulous lecturers offered to enhance grades in return for sexual or monetary favours. The most common form of sexual harassment cited was the *quid pro quo* or sex for grades exchange in which some male lecturers in both public and private universities considered that they had a *droit de seigneur*, or patriarchal entitlement to the sexual favours of their female students. Manuh, Gariba and Budu (2007: p. 138) also discussed 'transactional sex', or 'sexually transmitted grades', in their study of higher education in Ghana. They added that this type of sexual corruption was rarely

formally reported by female students, for fear of victimisation and stigmatisation.

Losses and gains

Discourses of loss in the student narratives were noticeable in both countries e.g. loss of opportunity to enter higher status public universities and loss of status, with private higher education seen as a second choice. Students were conscious that they were working within limits and that they had had to buy an education, as they were not entitled to state funded provision. This caused ontological issues of spoiled identity and material difficulties in meeting the fees in a commercially based contractual relationship with their universities.

While many students complained about their private university in terms of its second-class status and services, others saw these institutions as providing an opportunity structure for those who had been failed by the state. In their view, any access to higher education was better than none at all as it facilitated them 'becoming a somebody', with positional advantage and the potential for long-term material rewards. This was especially noticeable in students from poor, rural communities who were motivated to enter higher education as it represented an escape from poverty. More women and mature students were entering the two private universities than the two public universities studied – again raising questions about whether the private sector is opening up new opportunities for formerly excluded social groups. Or, indeed, whether less socially privileged students are getting diverted into less prestigious institutions.

The development of private higher education raises questions about values – value for money and how students are valued. Does the private sector represent enhanced, demand-led opportunities, market opportunism or a complex combination of opportunity and exploitation? It seems as if the symbolic power of being a university student in countries that sometimes have only a one per cent participation rate compensates for some of the shortcomings experienced in private universities. A male student in the Tanzanian private university said 'I am privileged ... Because there are few Tanzanians who get this education'.

Many of the students in these universities were from low socio-economic backgrounds, had a history of being failed by the education sector and had low expectations of quality. However, it seems that many private universities are operating way below minimal quality standards, with no sense of student entitlements or service-level agreements. This urgently needs to change in order to halt the vicious circle of poverty, low expectations of educational

institutions and low standards of delivery. There also needs to be more integration of equality issues into quality audits and global league tables.

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